

# "Ignorance of Scripture is Ignorance of Christ" St Jerome

## The Transfiguration according to St Luke

### OPENING PRAYER

Forgive us our selfish concerns with earthly things and our failure to acknowledge your glory in the face of Jesus Christ. Forgive us for that blindness to the wonder of your presence that causes us to live our lives from day to day without knowing you. Have mercy on us, give us grace to discern the suffering servant Lord in the midst of our lives, to worship and serve you in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

### SCRIPTURE: Luke 9:28-36

<sup>9:28</sup>It happened about eight days after these sayings, that he took with him Peter, John, and James, and went up onto the mountain to pray. <sup>9:29</sup>As he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became white and dazzling. <sup>9:30</sup>Behold, two men were talking with him, who were Moses and Elijah, <sup>9:31</sup>who appeared in glory, and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

<sup>9:32</sup>Now Peter and those who were with him were heavy with sleep, but when they were fully awake, they saw his glory, and the two men who stood with him. <sup>9:33</sup>It happened, as they were parting from him, that Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here. Let's make three tents: one for you, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah," not knowing what he said.

<sup>9:34</sup>While he said these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered into the cloud. <sup>9:35</sup>A voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him!" <sup>9:36</sup>When the voice came, Jesus was found alone. They were silent, and told no one in those days any of the things which they had seen.

## **EXEGESIS:**

### **CHAPTER 9: WHO IS JESUS?**

Earlier in this chapter, Herod "was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the ancient prophets had arisen. Herod said, 'John I beheaded; but who is this about whom I hear such things?' And he tried to see him" (vv. 7-9).

The question, "Who is Jesus?" is central to this Gospel in general and to chapter 9 in particular. Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" They answered, "John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen." Jesus asked, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "The Messiah of God" (vv. 18-20).

Jesus now tells the disciples what Peter's answer implies. "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (vv. 21-22). This answers the question, "Who is Jesus?" - not by giving him a title but by describing the process by which the Messiah will accomplish his work.

And then, in our Gospel lesson for today, we have the most dramatic answer to the question, "Who is Jesus?" God says, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" (v. 35).

### **VERSE 28: JESUS WENT UP ON THE MOUNTAIN TO PRAY**

<sup>28</sup>*Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray.*

Mark's Gospel says that it was six days later, and we are not sure why Luke changes it to eight days. Perhaps Luke was tying the Transfiguration to the resurrection, which occurred on the eighth day—the day after the Sabbath (Craddock, *Interpretation*, 133).

Verse 28 ties the Transfiguration to the preceding passage in which Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah and Jesus declares that he must suffer and die. All three of the Synoptics place the Transfiguration immediately after Jesus' first passion pronouncement, emphasizing that the one who will "undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (v. 22) is not a random victim of violence, but is indeed the Son of God (v. 35).

"Jesus took with him Peter and John and James..." (v. 28). In the preceding section, Jesus had been with the larger group of disciples. Taking Peter, John, and James with him signals an important event. This inner circle was present at the healing of Jairus' daughter (8:51). Mark 14:33 and Matt 26:37 tell us that these three were the disciples who would also be present at Gethsemane, but Luke says only that disciples were there (22:39, 45).

Note that the order of the names is different in Luke than in Mark and Matthew, which list "Peter and James and John" (Matt 17:1; Mark 9:2 and 14:33). Luke places John's name ahead of James here and in the story of Jairus' daughter, perhaps because Peter and John will be so closely linked later in Luke's writings (22:8; Acts 3:1-10; 4:1-22; 8:14-25) (Culpepper, 205).

They "went up on the mountain to pray" (v. 28). Mountains were places of prayer, and it was on mountains that many significant encounters with God occurred. This mountain is not named, but its name is unimportant. The model for this encounter is Moses at Sinai (Exod 19-32).

### **VERSES 29-33: THEY SAW HIS GLORY**

*<sup>29</sup>And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. <sup>30</sup>Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. <sup>31</sup>They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. <sup>32</sup>Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. <sup>33</sup>Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" - not knowing what he said.*

"And while he was praying, the appearance of his faced changed, and his clothes became dazzling white" (v. 29). This recalls the story of Moses, who encountered God on Sinai as a "devouring fire on the top of the mountain..." (Exod 24:17) and whose face shone brightly "because he had been talking with God" on Mount Sinai. He had to wear a veil to cover the brightness while in the presence of the Israelites (Exod 34:29-35).

Indeed, there are many parallels between the Exodus 24 account and Jesus' Transfiguration. Both incidents: (1) occur on a mountain (2) involve Moses (3) have God speaking from a cloud (4) and speak of the glory of the Lord. Luke "understands Jesus as a new Moses, who mediates the new law to his people and will deliver them out of bondage in a new exodus" (Achtmeier, 50).

And yet, Jesus' glory "is different from the glory of Moses, who shone because he looked upon the face of God and reflected God's glory as a mirror would.... Luke has Jesus shining of himself, thus identifying him with Yahweh" (Rohr, 128).

"Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him" (v. 30). The Jewish people were the people of the Law and the Prophets. Moses was the great lawgiver, and Elijah was the great prophet.

Moses and Elijah "appeared in glory..." (v. 31). The glory of Moses and Elijah is not intended to compete with the glory of Jesus, which is described in much more dazzling terms, but only confirms the status of Moses and Elijah as heavenly beings. The voice from the cloud will speak only of Jesus - not of Moses and Elijah - and will do so only after Moses and Elijah have departed (Cousar, et. al., 178). "The view that Jesus was a prophet like Moses, only greater... was of central importance to Luke and to his community, as is amply evidenced in Acts 3:22-26" (Nickle, 100).

Moses and Elijah "were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem" (v. 31). This is the only Gospel to tell us what Moses and Elijah discussed with Jesus. The word translated *departure* in the NRSV is *exodos*, which provides another parallel with Moses, who led the Exodus from Egypt. The departure about which they were speaking was Jesus' death. Both Moses' Exodus and Jesus' death are salvation events, designed to lead the people from bondage (slavery in Egypt on the one hand and bondage to sin on the other) to a Promised Land (the land of Israel on the one hand and the kingdom of God on the other).

"Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him" (v. 32). The disciples would also have a problem with sleep at the Mount of Olives (22:45). In that case, they actually fell asleep. In this case, it seems that they were groggy but sufficiently awake to see what was happening. Perhaps Peter's grogginess explains his inappropriate comment about three dwellings (v. 33).

"Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah - not knowing what he said' (v. 33).

Peter was a man of action! No restraint! That was his strength and his weakness. At a time when anyone else would sit in stunned silence, Peter would say, "Why don't we....?" None of the Gospels tell us why he wanted to build three dwellings. Perhaps he wanted to prolong the moment. Perhaps he wanted to honor Moses, Elijah and Jesus. Perhaps he wanted to offer Moses and Elijah a bit of hospitality. Probably he just wanted to do *something*. An action-man needs to act!

But there may be another connection with Moses at this point. As Moses led the Israelites in the wilderness, God told him to build booths in which the people would dwell for seven days for the festival that became known as the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev 23:33-43). They were to do this "so that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God" (Lev 23:43). This started as a harvest festival but, once the Israelites were firmly established in the Promised Land, they continued to observe this festival as a continuing reminder of their wanderings in the wilderness - and their escape from slavery in Egypt - and God's continuing faithfulness to them.

Peter's idea went nowhere. Luke describes Peter as "not knowing what he said" (v. 33) - making it clear that Luke considered Peter's proposal not a good one. Perhaps the problem was that Peter was trying to "routinize the presence of God's glory." Perhaps it was that he would treat "Jesus as the equal of Moses and Elijah" (Johnson, 155-156). The voice from the cloud interrupts so that Jesus never responds directly to Peter's suggestion.

### **VERSES 34-36: THIS IS MY SON, MY CHOSEN; LISTEN TO HIM!**

*<sup>34</sup>While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. <sup>35</sup>Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" <sup>36</sup>When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.*

The cloud was the symbol of the presence of God at Sinai (Exod 24:15-16; 34:5), and it symbolized God's presence for these three disciples. Later, at Jesus' ascension, "a cloud took him out of their sight" (Acts 1:9).

The disciples were terrified as the cloud enveloped them, because they understood the cloud as the presence of God. Only the High Priest was allowed to come into God's presence - and only on the Day of Atonement (Heb 9:7). To look on God's face was to die (Exod 33:20). Who knew what would happen when they came into God's presence! Perhaps they would die! Perhaps God would transport them to heaven bodily in a whirlwind as he had done with Elijah (2 Kings 2:1-11)! Whatever the outcome might be, these men felt terribly unworthy to stand in the presence of God, terribly unprepared to meet their Maker, and terribly vulnerable to whatever fate might lie in store for them. They were afraid.

"Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen...'" (v. 35). As stated above, throughout this chapter, the question has been, "Who is Jesus?" Now God provides the authoritative answer, "This is my Son, my Chosen." This is another connection with Moses, who had told the people, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet" (Deut 18:15; see also Acts 3:22; 7:37-53).

"...listen to him!" (v. 35). "...this command is...a preface to all Jesus' teaching of disciples on his journey to Jerusalem, teaching designed to prepare them for their tasks when he is no longer with them" (Tannehill, 162). The disciples would neither listen well nor carry out their tasks faithfully - until after the resurrection.

- They would fail to heal a boy with a demon (9:37-43).
- They would fail to understand Jesus' warning about his betrayal (9:43-45).
- They would argue about which one of them was the greatest (9:46-48).
- They would not understand Jesus prediction of his death and resurrection (18:31-34).
- Peter would deny Jesus (22:54-62).
- They would stand at a distance while Jesus was crucified (23:49).

But God would win the victory anyway!

"When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen" (v. 36). Moses and Elijah, who "were leaving him" (v. 33) prior to the voice from the cloud, were gone. The moment was over! The disciples had survived their encounter with God! They were left with Jesus and silence. Even Peter kept quiet! They didn't tell anyone what they had seen. There would be a time to speak, but they were not yet ready for the witness that they would make a few weeks later in Jerusalem (Acts 1-2).

### **CONCLUSION:**

We believe in Jesus Christ who,  
 though he was in the form of God,  
 did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,  
 but emptied himself,  
 taking the form of a slave,  
 being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,  
 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross.  
 Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every  
 name,  
 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,  
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
 and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
 to the glory of God the Father. - Philippians 2:5-11